

# **Educational Reform in the Balkans: Getting Past the Conflict in Kosovo**

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## ***Educational Reform in the Balkans: Getting Past the Conflict in Kosovo***

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper provides a brief history of education in Kosovo before and after the conflict. It then provides an understanding of the current state of affairs in the education of teachers in Kosovo as derived from interviews with two figures intimately involved with that process.

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### **Introduction**

The Serbian Province of Kosovo is an area of rich cultural diversity, active change, contrast, and sadly, ethnic conflict. However, under the protection of the North American Treaty Organization (NATO) and the aegis of the United Nations, there has been an attempt to address that conflict from a military perspective and otherwise. In particular, educational initiatives have been sought to change Kosovo's teacher education program from an authoritarian teaching paradigm to a liberal, inclusive curriculum focused upon a student-centered method of teaching. In a society where cultural marginalization, religious divisions, executions, and ethnic cleansing were the State agenda not long ago, has been a tremendous challenge.

This paper provides a brief history of education in Kosovo before and after the conflict. It then provides an understanding of the current state of affairs in the education of teachers in Kosovo as derived from interviews with two figures intimately involved with that process.

### **Setting the Context**

There is a paucity of literature in the English language on the system of education in Kosovo. However, based upon that which is available, it is fair to say that prior to 1990 the Serbian government in Belgrade allowed a certain degree of provincial autonomy in Kosovo. That situation changed in 1990 with the introduction of what has been termed by Lljunji and Salihu (2005), a Serbian centric constitution, ratified by the central government in Belgrade. What quickly followed were "a range of measures aimed at suppressing the [Kosovar-Albanian] majority [in Kosovo] . . . [In] 1992, Serbian authorities fired the approximately 26,000 ... [Albanian speaking Kosovar teachers] ... and imposed a unified Serbian curriculum, thereby effectively closing down Albanian language based education altogether (p. 2)." The effect upon over 93% of the population in Kosovo, which is of Albanian decent, was devastating and resulted in the creation of an underground alternative school system, the purpose of which was to preserve the Albanian heritage and language. That system was neither supported nor endorsed by the Serbian State. The ensuing civil war made schooling impossible for Albanian-Kosovars as they fled from persecution.

### ***The Post Conflict Period***

Kosovo emerged from the end of the conflict as a United Nations' protectorate, still legally a province of Serbia but under the military protection of NATO and politically administered by the United Nations Interim Administration Mission In Kosovo (UNMIK), the latter's priority being to encourage and oversee a transition of administration and control of the province from the Serbian capital of Belgrade, to indigenous Kosovars in Kosovo.

In giving a frank assessment of the state of post-conflict Kosovo's education system Pupovca (2001) cited the Thematic Review of National Policies for Education – Kosovo by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) stating that:

Observers say teaching and learning processes in Kosovo are very traditional. ...in elementary school, pedagogical and educational approaches are sometimes 'cruel' and do not encourage children to enjoy learning. ...teaching is based on overloaded curricula and 'factology' that puts little emphasis on understanding concepts and issues, or

developing thinking skills and habit of mind per se. Due to their past political and social experiences, many teachers lack training and hence the competence to create good, productive learning environments for students. Teachers are trained in eight separate institutes or faculties. ... Training is mainly academic and heavily subject-based; except the special pedagogy strand offered by the Faculty of Philosophy. The concept of teaching as a profession is missing form [sic] the training curriculum. Even some of the educationally relevant subjects are taught at a highly academic level. Teaching practice in schools or reflective teaching methods are carried out without any systemic view or clear objectives and goals. (p. 1)

To deal with this less-than-flattering assessment, an aggressive reform strategy was developed specific to teacher training. CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency) provided funds and expertise through KEDP (Kosovo Education Development Project) to a) bring to Kosovo pedagogical experts from the University of Calgary to train local facilitators, b) send several groups of Kosovar teachers to Canada for teacher training, and c) send officials and advisors from the Kosovo's Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (Ministry) to Canada to observe teacher preparation.

In 2001, KEDP, the Ministry, and the University Rector's Office (similar to the presidency of a Canadian university) formed a Joint Steering Board (JSB) to create a new Faculty of Education (Faculty) at the University of Prishtina in Kosovo. That same year, the Senate of that University approved a new teacher education curriculum, and in 2002, opened its new Faculty in four urban centres: Prishtina, Gjilan, Gjakova, and Prizren. The new program required three years of study at the University and one year of professional study at the Faculty to meet the licensing requirements of the newly created Ministry in charge of education in Kosovo. The move was a concurrent effort to go beyond the training of classroom teachers in Kosovo to the preparation of those who wished to become teachers at the University of Prishtina.

In addressing Pupovca's (2001) concerns, the fledgling teacher preparation programs offered a skill-based curricula emphasizing practice teaching, updated programs in cooperation with academic departments, and professional development for professors. Classes at the Faculty began in October 2002 with professional development training undertaken by KEDP staff and experts from Slovenia, Finland, Denmark, and Albania. Aiding this transition were many international agencies which were involved in the development of education in Kosovo: special needs education by the Finnish International Development Agency (FSDEK), curriculum development by UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), vocational education by the German International Agency, and support from CIDA which financed the Kosovo Educator Development Project.

As a result of this joint project, KEDP has been significantly involved in the reform of Kosovo's education system in three key areas: (a) in-service teacher training; (b) leadership training at all levels (school, district, and Ministry); and (c) higher education respecting the professoriate (KEDP, 2004). By the end of 2004, the consensus among professional advisors was that although the new Faculty of Education seemed to be a success, it was still a fragile institution lacking adequate resources, a specific building of its own (KEDP, 2004), and was faced with deep institutional resistance to the new teacher preparation program (Walker, 2004).

Through interviews with two administratively well-placed individuals in the Kosovo education system, the authors provide hereafter a glimpse into some of the challenges which pedagogical change in teacher preparation at the university level has engendered in Kosovo.

### *The Institutional Context*

Upon the opening of the Faculty of Education at the University of Prishtina a change oriented Dean was appointed, and in turn appointed his Pro Deans (similar to Associate Dean in Canada) who also supported the change in teacher preparation as espoused by the Ministry and KEDP. Initially, the Faculty sought to recruit qualified, change-oriented individuals into the professoriate, but was unable to find academically qualified personnel. Moreover, those professors who were available were near retirement, generally very conservative, and reluctant to embrace the new teacher preparation curriculum. Therefore, there was a tendency to return to the old authoritarian teacher preparation curriculum. Within short order the Faculty voted to remove the newly elected Dean and replace him with a conservative Dean who was reluctant to accept the new teacher preparation initiatives. This conservative Dean quickly removed all of the Pro Deans who had been appointed under the earlier administration and put a cadre of

conservative Pro Deans in place within the Faculty. Although the new administration had what it considered the best interests of the institution at heart, there was concern on the part of the Ministry and KEDP that change in the teacher preparation program in Kosovo had effectively come to a halt.

In order to ameliorate this situation the Ministry, CIDA, and KEDP took several initiatives. The Ministry allocated funds to build new facilities in Prishtina in order to service the teacher preparation program. Canadian, Finnish, and Danish international development agencies provided funds to finance the education of Kosovar students who sought graduate degrees outside of Kosovo by distance learning. The University of Calgary, Alberta, offered such courses in its Master of Education Program through distance learning, and fourteen Kosovars took advantage of that opportunity. These students, it was hoped, would become the future professoriate in the Faculty of Education, and thus inculcate the pedagogical changes necessary in Kosovo's teacher preparation program. Moreover, in support of that objective, the Ministry considered amending the bylaws of the University of Prishtina in order to allow for the hiring of Master's Degree candidates into the professoriate.

### *The Interview Process*

Two participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide (Anderson, 2002). Care was taken to ensure that both the conservative and liberal sides of the reform process were reflected in those interviewed (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Miles and Huberman, 1994). The data were employed to interpret and reconstruct the respondents' narratives in what Schwandt (2001) describes as a "Narrative and interpretive interactionist... dialogic process of communication; the 'exchange process' and joint constructions of account of social meaning and reflection" (p. 163).

Stake (1995) describes this approach as a means "to establish an emphatic understanding for the reader, through description, sometimes thick description, conveying to the reader what the experience[s] would convey" (p. 39). We refer not to a single instance, but a series of events and experiences which typify the conflict between the institutional forces of pedagogical change and conservatism.

To protect the anonymity of those involved in what is still an ethnically charged and physically dangerous area of the world, the participants' names, roles, and titles have been changed and their ethnic backgrounds are not stated. However, for reasons of academic transparency the International Electronic Journal for Leadership in Learning has had access to the original data.

It is to the two interviews that we now turn.

## **The Interviews**

### *Conservative Opinion*

The researchers interviewed a dean of a regional campus who had vehemently opposed the changes to the teacher preparation program fostered by the various international agencies. He had been recently appointed a Pro Dean by the newly-elected conservative Dean of the Faculty of Education. The Pro Dean, prior to his appointment, had published an article in one of Kosovo's daily newspapers, criticizing the creation, and programs, of the new Faculty of Education. During the interview for this paper, it was clear that his position regarding the new teacher preparation program had not changed. He remained opposed to the teacher preparation curriculum, and believed that the newly elected conservative Dean of the Faculty and many other faculty members agreed with his position. He expressed little concern at the possible withholding of funding to the University by international agencies if the change process were halted, and severely criticized the international assistance as being less than adequate for the task at hand. Moreover, it was his belief that given the traditional independence of universities, a decision on what changes, if any, to the Faculty of education were necessary was solely under the purview of the University's Senate not the Ministry or international agencies. It was his position that given the conservative stand of the current Dean of the Faculty of Education and the cohort of conservative, current Pro Deans on each of the campuses, the argument before the University Senate would be persuasive that, contrary to the changes sought by the Ministry, CIDA, KEDP, and some University professors, financial investment in the Faculty was of greater importance than the implementation of a new curriculum for teacher preparation. Perhaps most vehemently, he expressed the view that to attempt to transplant a Canadian model of teacher preparation was unrealistic as Kosovo's average classroom size was upwards of forty

students. In his opinion, such a large number of students argued against the practicality of importing Canadian pedagogical theory into Kosovo's classrooms and hence into its teacher preparation programs. It is clear that given the beliefs of the current administrative authorities in the Faculty of Education in Kosovo, pedagogical change in teacher preparation will face strong resistance from within the University.

### *The Liberal (Reform) Opinion*

Within Kosovo's Ministry responsible for higher education there has been a distinct desire for change. One highly placed individual in the Ministry who was interviewed took the position that although reform of the Faculty of Education and indeed the teaching in Kosovo's classrooms was moving at a slow pace, positive reform would eventually be achieved. In particular, he was of the opinion that the JSB's initiative to reform teacher education in Kosovo was the correct path for the University of Prishtina to pursue. He acknowledged the unfortunate history of the old system of teacher preparation and its fragmented university curriculum. Needed, in his belief, was an integrated teacher preparation program, incorporating in a seamless fashion the academic, professional, and practical training aspects of teacher preparation.

He noted that as the University's current enabling statute restricted lecturers' positions to those with a minimum of a Master of Arts degree. This restricted the pool of possible instructors to those who had taught teacher preparation and student curriculum from a conservative perspective. He recognized that this situation produced the dilemma that the JSB's original program of teacher preparation was impossible to implement at the University. He suggested that a resolution to this conundrum might well be for the Ministry to establish a College of Education as an independent teacher preparation facility outside of Kosovo's current university system of governance: a concept which he believed would attract the support of international agencies.

Given the above commentary, there is little wonder that there has been a division between the University and Ministry in charting a course for teacher preparation in Kosovo. The Ministry and the University's Rector's office are currently engaged in litigation, initiated by the Ministry, which alleges that there is a conflict of interest amongst the Rector's candidates for administrative positions at the University, and that among other things, the elections of members of faculty council was improper.

At stake, in the opinion of the individual interviewed, are the reforms to the teacher preparation program at the University of Prishtina's Faculty of Education as envisaged in the original concept manifested through the JSB and joint Ministry-KEDP-University documents. In a letter dated December 2004, the Ministry stated that it intended to ensure the implementation of the JSB and joint Ministry-KEDP-University standards for pre-service teacher preparation, and has requested that the University submit its teacher preparation program curriculum to the Ministry for approval. This matter has yet to be resolved.

### **Final Thoughts**

The forgoing interviews illuminate the difficulties faced in a region of conflict between the forces of conservatism and the forces of liberalism (reform). Ironically it appears to be, amongst other things, academic freedom which is driving resistance to change in teacher preparation at the University of Prishtina, while it is the government which is acting as the change agent. It may be that this is a case of administrative power versus legislative power with the intervention of the judiciary in an attempt to resolve that which is fundamentally a divide between two philosophies. The first predates Dewey, and emphasises the role of authority and the "one best way" mode of pedagogy, ostensibly attributing the necessity of such an approach to class size and other traditional pedagogical practices in schools. That pedagogy suggests that knowledge is an object and a teacher preparation program should provide that knowledge to the subject: the students in the University and the classrooms. It is a pedagogical tradition which is closed, pedantic, and parochial in nature. The second is a liberal; one might say post-modern, approach to pedagogy seen in the embryonic reform process which emphasizes knowing rather than knowledge for both student teachers and the students they will eventually teach. It is imbued with the necessity of critical thought as opposed to the orthodoxy of memorization and embraces change and the internationalization of the discussion around effective pedagogical practices.

Sadly sidelined in this dispute over pedagogy are the voices of the future cadre of new professors for the Faculty of Education - those graduate students currently working upon their Master of Education degrees through the University of Calgary, Alberta. The hope for positive pedagogical change in Kosovo's schools rests largely with these scholars.

### Conclusion

This paper has presented the perspectives of two influential individuals within the education system in the Serbian Province of Kosovo. It has been suggested that the clash of conservative and progressive forces within the University of Prishtina's Faculty of Education, with the progressive forces endorsed by both Kosovo's Ministry responsible for education and various international agencies in the effort to reform Kosovo's teacher preparation program at the new Faculty of Education at that University, will eventually determine the future of education in that ethnically torn part of Europe. Whether viewed from the conservative or liberal (reform) perspective the debate illuminated by this paper may be an encouraging sign of Kosovo's emerging institutions willingness and ability to grapple with fundamental issues in a democratic state.

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